

A Gentle Kind of Fire

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Category: StarTrek: Voyager
Genre: Romance
Language: English
Characters: Chakotay, K. Janeway
Status: Completed
Published: 1999-10-06 09:00:00
Updated: 1999-10-06 09:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 12:12:29
Rating: K+
Chapters: 1
Words: 6,080
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: KJ and C, Seven and ?, Six years after the return to the AQ.

A Gentle Kind of Fire

> <meta name="Generator"> The Flame Series **

A GENTLE KIND OF FIRE

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"And you are Kathryn Janeway, I presume?"

I looked guiltily up from contemplation of my toes into a pair of piercing midnight black eyes. I blinked, surprised at the stranger's intensity. He looked at me as if he knew me - very well. That threw me off balance.

I glanced quickly toward the direction of the bonfire. Many of the attendees of the Voyager annual gathering had completed partaking of the admittedly large quantity of food and were settling in for naps, games and simple chit-chat. Children ran to the waters edge then darted away in droves as the waters rushed the beach. Their laughter floated faintly on the wind. No one seemed to be missing this dark man.

"I don't believe we've met," I said, making ready to rise to my feet.

He shook his head. "No need to get up," and plopped down beside me. I hoped the odd look I gave him was noticeable.

He laughed aloud, and offered his hand. "I'm Ravin Cari. Betazoid."

"Aaaah," I nodded. That explained the laugh. My first inclination upon being around Betazoids is to school my thoughts; it's a reflex almost. One that most telepaths notice right off. Most generally develop a little half-smile and go on with business. Others pretend not to notice.

Ravin smiled broadly. "I should also warn you that I am Annika's fiancÃ©e."

That was a surprise. A shock actually. "Really?" I asked, trying to imagine the Seven I'd known for 8 years with this dark, laughing man.

"We fit quite well together," Ravin answered the unasked.

I didn't even try to forestall the small rush of irritation that enveloped me. "Isn't it impolite to delve into someone else's thoughts?" .

"It is," Ravin admitted, calmly. "But your thoughts were clearly written on your face. And you are not the first to have asked...thought...the question."

"Allow me to offer my congratulations," I smiled then. I couldn't argue his point. I'd have expected Seven to bond with the Doctor before choosing a Betazoid, of all species. I glanced passed him toward the happy gathering. After 6 years back in the Alpha Quadrant, our little group had grown. It seemed that for a while everyone was getting married, having families. But now things had calmed. The whole group no longer joined in on the yearly reunions. I spotted many of the regulars though in search of the blonde-headed, former Borg. Neelix, B'Elanna, Tom, Wildman... And then I spotted her. She was standing beyond the group on the opposite side of the beach with another familiar form. One that I was intensely surprised to see present.

"Annika and I thank you," he said, interrupting my surprise. "But, I'm here in an official capacity."

"Oh?" I pulled my eyes away from the scene, but the image remained in the back of my mind. He'd allowed his hair to grow slightly, and the gray had begun to come in several years earlier. I'd learned that from a press release concerning one of his Anthropological studies. But seeing the flesh of him, no longer light years away, caused a mild upset to my system.

"...will you do it?"

I'd only been half-listening to Ravin, and I'm sure he knew it. "Pardon?" I asked, blinking so as to force my mind onto what he was saying.

He smiled. "Annika thinks of you as the person who has most profoundly shaped her life. She would like you to stand in the place as - what among humans would be - adoptive mother. "

"Of course, I'd be honored to," I answered. "What would I need to do?"

"First," Ravin answered. "I must introduce myself to you, and I have. At which time I make the formal request. Those items are out of the way. Next, we must talk. Share."

"Share?" I asked cautiously. I'd heard enough stories about Betazoids that the word caused more than a little anxiety.

"Just talk, share," Ravin assured me. "A gift of words, if you will."

"Okay," I said. "Let's talk. Is there anything in particular that we should talk about?"

"You could ask a question," Ravin suggested.

"There is one thing I'd like to know." I said. "How did you and Seven meet?"

"There was an accident at Andromeda V. She was injured. I was one of the attending medical team. She strongly disagreed with a course of treatment that I'd prescribed for her; said it was illogical as well as irrelevant."

I laughed. "That sounds like Seven." Some things never changed. "Who won?"

"I would say that we both won."

I smiled at the joy I saw reflected in his gaze. Ravin was obviously very fond of Seven. As odd as their pairing seemed, I hoped that it would work out for them.

"One cannot explain the placed one finds love." Ravin mused. "What of you? Why have you never married?"

"Now that's a long story," I said, making light of the question.

I could feel Ravin's curiosity. "Have you never been in love? I find that hard to believe."

"I've been in love," I admitted. "Several times, in fact."

"One still burns in you," he said. "I can sense it."

I shot him a piercing look, and he raised his hands in self-defense. Satisfied that he really wasn't up to any telepathic tricks, I turned my gaze oceanward. "Old emotions," I assured him.

"Old emotions ." He repeated the words to himself. "Old emotions can sometimes become demons. Do these 'old emotions' bother you?"

"Isn't this getting a bit personal?" I asked.

"Part of the talking," he said, a bit of humor in his voice.

I smiled, but didn't answer. And he didn't push. The waves continued

to wash up unto the sand, it was now within a meter of my toes. Maybe it was the surroundings, maybe it was because Ravin was a stranger, and hadn't been there, but I discovered that I wanted to share, to talk about the things that had taken place years prior.

"Sometimes," I said, though it was nearing 30 minutes since he'd asked the question. "Sometimes when I see children running along the beach, or families gathered together. Invariably when I hear a particularly poignant storytelling. Often when I look at the stars."

"What do you do when that happens?" he asked.

"The same thing I've always done. I focus on duty, on work. I keep myself busy."

"Can there not be any resolution?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't possible before. I don't think it's possible now."

"You may think of me as a hopeless romantic, but I believe that sometimes when a bond between two people is very strong; it can not be broken, it must simply be. In these cases, the couple may fear the fire of their union, that they may be consumed by it. I've discovered that, once fear is overcome a gentle kind of fire remains."

I felt Ravin's touch on my arm, and he gestured toward the two humans walking in our direction. The sun had begun its descent, and I couldn't make out the faces, but the forms were unmistakable. He stood and grasped the hand of the blonde woman. "Annika has told me many things about you. I can sense your bravery, your strength, and your honor. It is our wish that you may overcome your fears. Your gentle fire awaits you."

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BURNS BRIGHTLY STILL

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I stepped onto the beach. The sound of crashing waves, muted voices and the smell of the sea assaulted my senses. All around were the people I'd served with not so long ago. None had noticed me there yet, which allowed me to just stand back and observe what had once been my extended family. Children frolicked happily near the water's edge, and parents were talking, dancing, singing, playing games.

My eyes tracked a course along the sands and found a couple sitting at a distance from the rest. I recognized the woman immediately; the man was a stranger. A wave of - I wasn't sure what to call it after so many years, regret, perhaps? - washed over me. I closed my eyes, willing it to pass.

A voice at my side startled me. "Are you well, Commander?"

My eyes snapped open. Seven. "Yes, I'm fine." I told her. "Just...enjoying the day. I received your message. Is there anything wrong?"

She gazed around the crowded beach, and gestured toward a less populated area. "Would you care to walk, Commander?"

I smiled, "The title is honorary, Seven. I'm no longer a member of Starfleet."

"You are correct," she said softly. "Would you prefer Chakotay?"

My smile broadened. "I'd be honored," I said. Something about her demeanor had changed. Her words and mannerisms were still the Seven of Nine I remembered from Voyager, but her tone had changed, become softer, less forced.

"I would like to make a request?" she said, picking her way around a clump of shells that someone had built into something unidentifiable. The children had obviously reached this section of the beach at some point during the day.

"What do you need?" I asked, tracking the tiny footprints that led away from the sand structure back along the beach. I imagined a dark-haired little girl frolicking with her friends.

"Would you give me away?" She asked.

I came to a halt, tiny footprints forgotten. "Pardon?"

"I am to be bonded to Ravin Cari of Betazed. I request that you stand as adoptive father, and as the custom dictates, 'give me away'."

I must have gaped at her for several seconds as my mind tried to grasp three facts: Seven was getting married. To a Betazoid. And she wanted me to give her away. I wasn't sure where to start. "What about Tuvok?" I found myself saying.

"It is a human custom," she replied.

"But, Seven...I'm... My people don't..."

"Are you declining?" she asked.

"No," I shook my head, took a deep breath. "I'd love to, Seven. I was just worried that I'd be stepping on someone else's toes."

"You won't be," she assured me. "Tuvok will be otherwise involved in the ceremony. According to the tradition, those who most shaped my life should be involved in the ceremony."

"I'm honored," I said, not sure what else I could say. I was honored. But also stunned. Seven and I had never been particularly close. I couldn't imagine what part I might have shared in shaping her life.

We began to walk again. "Who else will be in the ceremony?" I asked.

"Commander Tuvok, because he served as my mentor both during and after my time on Voyager. We've had an...affinity for some time. Naomi Wildman, because she taught me friendship. Neelix because...."

I nodded my head as she went down the list. I could understand each selection. The last name I'd been expecting, and thought I was prepared for it.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"No? What makes you think that there is?"

"Your steps slowed by 15.2 % when I mentioned Admiral Janeway."

I laughed, shook my head. "It's normally Tuvok's job to pull tricks like that," I said. "I'd forgotten about your implants."

"Nevertheless," she said. "Your steps faltered. Is there some difficulty?"

"No, no difficulty. It's just been a long time."

She surprised me by nodding. "I am aware of this. You have not attended any of the yearly gatherings beyond the first. And --"

"Seven, I really don't want to talk about this." I said. The things that happened, or didn't happen between Kathryn Janeway and myself were between Kathryn Janeway and myself. I wouldn't, couldn't discuss it with anyone, lest of all Seven.

"I understand," she said. "I apologize if I have offended you."

I shook my head. "I'm not offended."

She turned and glanced along the beach. The sun was beginning its descent and some families were beginning to pack up for the evening. The festivities would continue throughout the weekend. "I believe it is time for you to meet Ravin."

I nodded and followed her as we turned back.

She stared off in the distance for a moment, before she continued. "I have told you reason for the presence of each member of my wedding party. Would you like to know the reason for your presence?"

I frowned slightly. "Yes."

"From you, I learned the truth of love."

Four shocks in one day. "I'm not following..."

"Many doubt that a relationship between Ravin and myself can last. They feel that it is...lust only. They are wrong. I observed your behavior toward Captain Janeway for four years on board Voyager. There were many times when your feelings were less than vague. I was not aware of any physical intimacy between the two of you, and yet your attachment remained, and grew. You sacrificed for her."

"I have similar feelings for Ravin. I would sacrifice much for him. It is not logical, but it is true. I work for his happiness and he for mine. As you did, for her."

I'd lost count of the number of shocks this day had brought. I could only stand and listen as the man who I assumed must have been Ravin Cari stood and Kathryn with him. He moved and took Seven's hand, and the two took a step back, leaving me standing next to Kathryn.

He glanced between the two of us, seeming to continue the conversation he was having with Kathryn, only I was now included. "Annika has told me many things about you," he said. "I can sense your bravery, your strength, and your honor. It is our wish that you may over come your fears. Your gentle fire awaits you. Even in the face of adversity, it burns brightly still."

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AND CHANGES EVERYTHING

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Seven turned to Ravin, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes and the barest hint of a smile on her lips. "How did she respond?"

Ravin clutched his fingers more tightly around hers, and returned the smile. "Just as you said she would, my love."

"Good," the ex-Borg said, and turned her gaze oceanward. She took a moment to marvel at the crimson sliver of Sun that remained to settle into the dim waters of the horizon. She remembered a story Ravin had once tried to convince her of: that if one listened closely during the sunset, one could hear the sizzling of the ocean as the hot orb penetrated its waters. She remembered the event with perfect clarity; she'd told him the story was false as well as illogical. He'd laughed and asked if she had any imagination at all. She'd spent the following 24 hours in an attempt to convince him that she did indeed have imagination. That was one of the things she loved about this man; he challenged her on a human level, in ways she'd never contemplated. Suns setting over water would always remind her of that.

She turned to him now, taking in his outline. His eyes were closed, focused inward. "They would not appreciate our intrusion," she said. "They are both very private individuals."

A smile spread Ravin's lips before he opened his eyes, shooting her a sidelong glance. "I'm aware of that. I was simply checking to see if our work was in vain, feeling them out only. I promise."

Seven returned her gaze to the splendor of the setting sun, satisfied with his answer.

"You're very protective of them," Ravin observed. His eyes now rested on her outline.

Seven turned to meet his gaze. "They are important to me," she said. "I would like them to be happy as we are happy."

Ravin smiled at her words, but remained silent. He felt that there was something more. He was right. When Seven spoke again, her words were almost hesitant.

"I overheard a conversation between several of my former shipmates. At first I did not understand them, and as his words were not spoken with malice it did not seem appropriate to mention them to Tuvok. As I have grown in my knowledge of humanity, I have come to understand the meaning of the crewman's words."

"What did the crewman say?" Ravin asked gently.

"Commander Chakotay was dining alone in the mess hall when one of the crewmembers questioned another about the status of his and Captain Janeway's relationship. The crewmember responded that Captain Janeway no longer had time for Chakotay because she was too busy with baby Borg."

Ravin winced slightly, seeing the conclusion that Seven had jumped to. "You're not responsible, Annika."

"Captain Janeway spent a large percentage of time attempting to make me a part of the Voyager crew. Commander Chakotay assisted only because she desired it. So in part, I am responsible. I would like to assist in the repair of their relationship."

"Well, you've taken the first steps by simply getting them together. The rest is up to them."

"Yes," Seven nodded her agreement, then turned and looked in the direction of the rock. The light had grown dim, but she could still make out the outline of the two humans. Logic dictated that talking would help them to work out their differences. But she knew with matters of the heart, logic was irrelevant.

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Chakotay watched Kathryn watching Seven and Ravin moving across the sand. There were faint lines around her mouth, and she'd allowed her hair to grow longer. It had been pulled back into a loose knot at the base of her neck, but a few wisps had escaped and danced in the breeze that came with the rising of the tide.

She was still Kathryn as he'd remembered her, the same determined line to her jaw. He knew that she was probably mentally cursing Seven and Ravin for strong-arming her into this position. When she turned to face him, the same intelligent blue gaze enveloped him, leaving him awash in the memories of things that had once been....

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FIVE YEARS EARLIER

The winds along the beach blustered in the brilliant sunlight. Laughing voices mingled with smell of salt air and food cooked over an open fire. Chakotay found the object of his search easily. She was standing alongside a dark-haired gentlemen, speaking animatedly. Chakotay was sure he didn't know the man, but he did know the very intense way the man watched Kathryn. He was surprised when a wave of jealousy rose within him.

His usual happiness at seeing her in person, devolved into confusion. Of course he'd known his heart as far as Kathryn Janeway was concerned for years now, but that it should strike him at this moment

threw him off balance. Perhaps it was because they had been 'home' for more than a year, and still their relationship had gone no further. Always in the Delta Quadrant, he could accept the issue of protocol as her reasoning. And then, after their return, there had been a media frenzy of epic proportions. Their lives and actions had been probed first by a Federation anxious for new technology and the priceless information that had been collected in Voyager's database, and then by a public whose imagination had been captured by their tale of survival, and unity. Privacy had been impossible.

Now, most of the crew had resigned, hoping for a return to 'normal' life. That desire wouldn't be so easily fulfilled by members of the command staff. It was six months before resignation was even an option, as Starfleet requested their assistance in accessing and integrating the incredible new technology they'd developed to get them home. But that had all ended four months earlier, and he and Kathryn had kept contact even though he'd resigned, and she remained on a well deserved leave-of-absence. Still on any given week she could be seen addressing a group, or being interviewed by some member of Intergalactic News Agency. It became a private joke that she was the face of Starfleet.

Turning away from that face, he moved sightlessly, searching for a means of escape and nearly collided with a smiling young woman and a plate piled high with an array of roasted foods. Mistaking his tormented expression for surprise at nearly spilling her plate, she quickly brushed aside his apology and pushed the plate toward him.

"I'm Sharon Macey. Lt. Jerry Macey is my brother," she explained quickly, her smile warm and friendly. "Neelix assigned me server's duties, this is for you."

It was reflex that caused the plate to end up in his fingers, and before he could offer a word to decline the food, the young woman was gone. He gazed at the plate a moment, fighting sudden nausea. This wasn't going to help him. Glancing quickly around, he froze when his eyes caught Kathryn's. She was waving him over.

Caught, and with no option, he approached. The man was Stuart Clemmens, and he'd arranged many of the appearances that Starfleet had 'suggested' that Kathryn keep. Clemmens smiled knowingly at Chakotay when Kathryn introduced him.

"I'm here to keep her sane," Clemmens said, shaking Chakotay's hand. "And there's absolutely no way I couldn't have recognized you. Your face is almost as well known as Kathryn's."

"Better, I assure you," Kathryn joked, nudging Clemmens.

"No, no," Clemmens laughed. "You're the 'face of Starfleet'."

Chakotay felt himself still.

Kathryn touched his arm, and smiled up at him. "I told Stuart about our little joke," she said. "Since he's been tasked with what we both agree to be the ridiculous assignment of maintaining the image Starfleet is determined to portray."

Chakotay nodded, and forced a smile. There was a rapport between Kathryn and Stuart Clemmens which was reminiscent of what he and she had shared those early years in the Delta Quadrant, especially after New Earth. This man no doubt worked with her every day, while Chakotay only spoke to her via comm. several times a week when she wasn't running to one conference or another. They'd been regaining some of the closeness they'd once shared, taking it slow he'd thought. There was plenty of time. But now he was beginning to realize that perhaps he was only fooling himself. The things he hoped for could never be. That knowledge choked him, made him feel cold. Making quick excuses, he found a way to slip away from the party.

It was a week before he heard from Kathryn again. He had met an old friend after leaving the beach and had not returned to his apartment since. During the visit, he'd been offered a position on a long-term anthropological expedition headed for the Delta Quadrant. It would be leaving in ten days. He'd gone back to his apartment to pack and end his lease. A long queue of messages awaited his attention. Several were from Kathryn.

Her first messages had been mildly probing, subtly questioning his actions during the reunion. Her subsequent messages were more pointed, worry seeping in between the almost angry words. Her final message had stated flatly that she would be in San Francisco for the next week, should he wish to contact her.

As he sat watching them, Chakotay felt a wave of guilt wash over him. Though she spoke emotionlessly, hurt was implicit in her tone. What had he been doing anyway by remaining out of touch? Reactivating the comm. unit, he made a transporter reservation for San Francisco. He'd planned to announce his departure to her comm unit, but he owed her more than that. He'd meet her once more, and then he would get on with his life as she had gotten on with hers.

Thirty minutes later, he found himself walking along the path that lead to the door of Kathryn's apartment. They were part of Starfleet's Auxiliary San Francisco Complex, and generally reserved for top brass. Greenery of a dozen varieties decorated the area, scenting the air with the sweetness associated with spring and rebirth. The greenery also served to shield the area from the prying eyes of media types, still in search of details to their story.

He paused briefly at the door, struggling with a sudden attack of anxiety. He and Kathryn hadn't worked side by side in months, and technically, they'd ended their relationship as First Officer and Captain months earlier. But the momentum had still been there; they hadn't been able to break the mold that they'd both become comfortable with. He was about to change all that. He was about to say good-bye to Kathryn Janeway.

Firmly, before he could talk himself out of it, he reached to activate the door signal. But before he touched the sensor, the door slid open.

"Oh...I'm sorry," he stumbled over the words. "Did I come at a bad time?"

"No," Kathryn shook her head. "The auto-attendant notified me that you were here. Come in?"

Chakotay nodded, and tried at a smile before following her into the apartment. She turned, glancing over her shoulder and offered him a drink.

He declined, and took a moment to just look around. The living room was professionally decorated, its design open and bright. Large plants, similar to those in the courtyard, also adorned the apartment. . The design was open and bright, and decorated with large plants as the outer courtyard had been. A glass door on one side of the room lead out unto a deck complete with hot tub. On the other side of the room was a corridor that lead off to other parts of the house. He was impressed, and wondered that he hadn't seen where she lived since their return. Looking classically elegant in her many appearances, this was the type of surrounding she belonged in.

But he also remembered another side of Kathryn. A side that was content to grow tomato plants in a fledgling garden, unconcerned about the trappings of society. He turned then and faced her, curious to see if any part of that Kathryn would be there. The expression in her eyes caught him off guard. She was waiting.

"I'm leaving," the words spilled into the silence of the room unadorned. "I came to say good-bye."

Her expression collapsed. "What?"

Forcing himself not to think about what he was doing, he repeated the words. "I'm leaving, Kathryn. I've accepted a long-term anthropological expedition to the Delta Quadrant."

"But --" Kathryn began, barely above a whisper. Then turning away from him, her movements echoing her shock, she walked toward one of the large windows overlooking dense shrubbery. Whatever she'd been expecting, this clearly wasn't it. "Why --" she started again, waving a hand in helpless confusion.

"A friend needed some help," he sighed. "He's been after me for a while..."

"Why, really, Chakotay?" she asked, seeing through the excuse.

"What have I really done since Dorvan? The odd job here and there to keep busy?" What he didn't say was that he had done that to remain on earth. Where she was. "I realize that I've been going nowhere, and I can't do that anymore. My father used to say that life was for living every day. I need to live."

Kathryn's brow furrowed in confusion, as she studied him. She began walking toward him as if proximity might give her the answers she sought. "Can we talk about it?" she asked softly when she was only a foot away.

"Yes," Chakotay nodded, an odd sensation flooding his senses. All sign of confusion was gone from Kathryn's face, only a hint of determination and something that he was sure he was misinterpreting remained.

Gently, she reached a hand to his cheek, all the while her eyes never

leaving his. Her fingers traced gently over his tattoo and up into his hair. Her fingernails grazed his scalp as her fingers trailed down to the back of his neck. He couldn't suppress the shiver that coursed through him as her hand closed around the back of his neck and pulled his head to her level. The first touch of her lips on his sent shocks through his system. The smell and feel and taste of her registered on his senses, and then all thoughts ceased as his arms went convulsively around her, pulling her up off her feet.

6 days, 22 minutes and 47 deliriously happy minutes later, they were playing in the whirlpool when a message came over the comm center. Having spent the past week simply enjoying one another, with no talk of protocol or duty or work, they had instructed the computer to save and store all messages until further notice. Only a priority message could override that command.

Laughing at his attempts to keep her in the warm water, Kathryn swatted his hands away and climbed out of the tub.

Chakotay, having heard the entire conversation, climbed out of the water and proceeded to dress. Kathryn flew by him in a rush, headed for the shower, the familiar determined line to her jaw. She hadn't said a word. Chakotay took it in stride and began to straighten up the place, replicated refreshments. By the time Kathryn appeared from the bedroom, dressed formally, everything was in place.

Chakotay had smiled at her, moved to embrace her. But she had been distracted, pushed him away. "I think you should leave," she'd said, moving to the opposite side of the room. Chakotay had followed her, thinking that she must have been kidding. After all they had shared the past days, she couldn't mean it.

"Why?" Chakotay asked, suddenly angry that she could be so cool.

She'd rolled her eyes as if she had been pushed to the end of her patience. "Chakotay, I really can't get into this right now."

"Don't think I don't know what's going on here," Chakotay said. "I won't continue to be in your life as a shadow only. I won't hide behind closed doors as if I'm something shameful."

Kathryn had been furious. She'd opened her mouth as if to speak, but then her door chime had rang. She'd closed her eyes, struggling for control of her temper. When she opened her eyes a cool mask had fallen back into place. "I would appreciate it if you would just go, please." And so he'd left as she directed. Out the back way. Slinking unseen, like something shameful.

The sound of the pounding surf brought him back to the present, and he looked at her once more. There was something in her eyes alongside the determination.

"How are you, Chakotay?" she asked softly, gesturing that they sit on the rocks from which she and Ravin had earlier risen. Then drawing her knees up and wrapping her arms about them, she returned her gaze out to sea, not waiting for his response.

Chakotay settled alongside her, ensuring her that he was fine and

turned the question back to her.

"I'm fine," she responded in the same manner in which he had and continued. "I suppose Seven of Nine convinced you to come here?" she said, more a statement than a question.

Chakotay nodded, wondering at her manner. Deciding not to push her, he continued the polite, surface conversation. "I don't know if I'll ever get over the shock of Seven and a Betazoid."

Kathryn smiled a bit at that, shook her head. "Neither will I," she admitted, turning to face him, her tone not quite right for the words she'd spoken. Chakotay thought he saw something akin to pain in her eyes. When she spoke her words were soft, tortured, barely discernible over the sounds of the ocean. "Why did you leave?"

Chakotay was so utterly unprepared for the question that he simply stared. "What?"

"Why did you leave?" she demanded more firmly. "After everything that happened. After...us. Why did you leave?"

"You asked me to leave, Kathryn. Remember?"

"Yes, I did," she admitted dismissively with a wave of her hand. "But you never came back. It took me four months just to figure out where you were!"

Chakotay hadn't expected that she'd looked for him. He blinked several times in an attempt to gather his thoughts. For years he'd only had his side, it had never occurred to him that she might have viewed things differently. Defensiveness rose within him. "Where I was? My last words to you were that I couldn't stay in your life only as a shadow, that I wouldn't be hidden away like something shameful."

"I wasn't ashamed of you," Kathryn shot back, turning again toward the ocean.

"Not even a little, Kathryn?" Chakotay couldn't resist. "Not even in some small part of your mind that felt demeaned to be reduced to the old cliché of a Captain falling in love with her first officer?"

Kathryn turned toward him, surprise written all over her face.

"I knew," Chakotay said. "I was there for all the interviews, remember? I heard all the insinuations. I *know* you."

"I suppose you do, at that," she looked down at her hands. "I'd always prided myself on not giving a damn what people thought. I always used protocol as a reason for not having a relationship with you. When protocol was removed, I found that there was something else preventing me: Fear. Fear of the mold that society would cast me into, fear of the rumors, fear of proving the polls right..."

"What changed your mind," Chakotay asked. "If only briefly."

"The realization that not only couldn't I imagine a day without you.

I didn't want to even try to." She smiled sadly in his direction.

"What went wrong, Kathryn?"

"Our relationship was so new Chakotay. I wanted to savor it. And I didn't want it brought to the public's attention by a pair of nosy media relations top brass. "

"Why couldn't you just tell me that then?" Chakotay asked.

"There wasn't time," Kathryn shrugged. "I wasn't sure. I thought I would have a chance later... I'm so sorry Chakotay."

"The apology is mine," Chakotay said. He looked across at the way her toes burrowed in the sand, and the way the wind blew at her hair. "Nothing has changed, Kathryn. I don't think I can ever stop loving you." Gesturing up toward the now starry sky, he continued. "Out there, studying alien peoples, you were there beside me." He chuckled to himself. "I got into the habit of talking to you at night. Whenever I found some interesting tidbit of information, I recorded it, just for you. I thought it was just my perverse nature, always yearning for that which could not be. But now, I realize that it was more than that. It was my way of holding on to you."

Bringing his eyes back to hers, he went on. "When I think of all the wasted time, I can only hope that it is not too late."

Kathryn smiled, a sparkle reaching her eyes. "When I think of all the wasted time," she said, drawing closer. "All I can think of is catching up."

Ravin's eyes opened suddenly, and he grabbed Seven's hand. "I think it's time we leave," he said his voice full of meaning. What he could detect with his empathic senses, Seven detected with her enhanced vision. She smiled, satisfied.

"I believe you are correct. "

"So Annika, my dearest, when do you suppose we should tell them that we are having a *very* traditional Betazoid ceremony?"

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End
file.